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ABSTRACT

The use of English-language literature in South African college instruction for Black students, for many of whom English is a second language, is discussed, drawing on relevant literature. First, the conditions of the education of Black students in South Africa is reviewed, and it is suggested that this population often arrives in higher education without having been taught appropriate study skills, writing skills, learning strategies, or comprehension in English. Large classes in Black universities are also seen as a problem. Formidable linguistic, cultural, and formal barriers to Black student comprehension of English literary texts are borne out in student achievement patterns. Some educators suggest that more African material, both creative and critical, must be incorporated into the curriculum and that Eurocentric texts should be de-emphasized, while others feel that traditional literature instruction and language instruction are more appropriately separated. The introduction of new language teaching techniques and strategies in South Africa is outlined, and their potential role in comprehension of literature is examined. It is concluded that literature can provide both motivation for language acquisition and better understanding of the language itself. (MSE)

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A South African perspective on the teaching of literature to ESL undergraduates

by Moyra Evans

ED 375 608

Undergraduate literature teachers in South Africa face a range of challenges that, while not unique, are perhaps quite different from those experienced by their American and British counterparts. What exacerbates the situation is that most university English departments in South Africa were originally modelled on traditional British university English departments, which catered solely to the needs of mother-tongue speakers of English. English teaching in South African universities has undergone a complete change of face over the last decade. English departments in the traditionally English language universities which previously consisted of homogeneous groups of first language speakers now need to accommodate growing numbers of second-language speakers. About 90% of the students entering first-year English courses in South African universities are ESL speakers, most of whom have matriculated in Black schools. In Black universities, where the medium of instruction is also English, almost all the students are ESL speakers, who have a variety of different African languages as their mother-tongues.

The situation in Blacks schools in South Africa plays a large part in shaping the communicative and literary competence of the students in the English classes at South African universities. Although this is due to change in the near future, at the time of writing (1993), Black schools are at present still administered by an education department which is quite separate from the provincial education departments

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which administer the schools attended by White students. The effects of this educational system are likely to be felt for many years in the undergraduate classes in South African universities. Conditions in most Black schools in South Africa do little to encourage real learning. The instruction is almost entirely teacher-centred. Students are encouraged in rote memorisation and are not guided in the development of independent study or problem-solving skills (see Harley, 1983; Thembela, 1984; Hofmeyr and Spence, 1989; Janks 1990).

Teachers and students alike are caught up in the predicament in which Black schools find themselves. Many teachers are under-qualified[1] and badly or irregularly paid (see Thembela, 1984). Many schools have poor facilities[2] and are usually severely overcrowded. The average student-teacher ratio is 1:17 for White schools and 1:40 for Black schools. In the English classes the ratio often goes as high as 1:70 in Black Schools. Since 1976 Black schools have been subjected to recurring disturbances (see Thembela, 1984; Janks, 1990; Samuel, 1992). Pupils have often missed out on months of schooling at a time. The failure rate in Black schools is high too. In 1990 36.7% of the Black students passed the matriculation examinations[3], while 95.8% of the Whites passed their examinations (Du Pisani et al., 1991). In other grades, Black students are often advanced on the

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1. Approximately 87 percent of the teachers in Black schools have less than a three-year post-school teacher's certificate (Hofmeyr and Spence, 1989; Du Pisani et al., 1991).
2. There is often no electricity. Hardly any Black schools have libraries or media centres.
3. The final year of school, equivalent to 12th grade in the United States.

basis of age, to make room for new intakes of students at the beginning of an academic year, or sometimes as a result of pressure from students, many of whom subscribe to the now popular catchphrase "Pass one, pass all" (see Janks, 1990).

There are few opportunities for Black schoolchildren to develop advanced levels of competence in English. While Afrikaans and English-speaking children receive all their schooling in their mother tongues, South African Black schoolchildren do **not**. For the first four years of school (from the age of about six), Black students are taught in their mother tongues. Thereafter the medium of instruction for all subjects[4] is English. However, the majority of these students never speak English at any time other than in the school classroom, where they are taught by teachers often themselves not competent in English (see Mawasha, 1984; Thembela, 1984). Most Black schools do not have libraries and most Black residential areas do not have public libraries. There is thus little opportunity for students to develop adequate receptive or productive skills in English.

Undergraduates who matriculate in the Black schools often find it difficult to adapt to university education. First-year students experience grave problems following lectures and taking notes. They have not been taught how to use reference material or how to write logical essays. They are frequently

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4. This will be changing during 1993, after parents have voted on a number of options presented by the DET. Possible alternatives are that the change-over to English instruction be staggered over a number of years, or that children have English as the medium of instruction from the first year of school.

able to memorise extensive sections of textbooks, but find it difficult to apply critical skills to literary texts[5]. In the national examinations set for Black matriculation students, the questions on the English literature papers are almost entirely contextual, designed to test the students' recall of the fictional plot. No questions are formulated to test the literary competence of students, and since the whole school system in South Africa is geared towards the final school examination (the matriculation examination), students are not guided towards acquiring literary competence.

Other factors also complicate the ESL undergraduate teacher's task. On the smaller campuses in South Africa, staff-student ratios are generally very high. English undergraduate classes at the Black universities are particularly large since English is a popular choice for Arts students. The staff-student ratio for undergraduate English on my own campus is 1:150. One of my first-year English classes has close on 300 students.

As may be expected, given the present situation, most undergraduates in South Africa experience formidable linguistic, cultural and formal barriers to comprehension when reading English literary texts. Many ESL undergraduates are

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5. One of my third-year ESL students has this to say about her experiences:

> When I first came into the university, it was difficult to analyse or criticise any type of literary work ... At high school level the reader can answer any question in literature so long as he/she knows the story itself. But here at university level, you must know the story, the style, how that author writes, etc..
>
> (Mbhele, 1992).

Also see Hofmeyr and Spence (1989).

first-generation literates who clearly do not come from a literary background. Research on the reading abilities of first-year South African undergraduates (Blacquiere, 1987) has shown that English and Afrikaans-speaking students generally have a reading ability of about stage 4 and sometimes as high as 5 (see Chall, 1983) in their favourite subjects. Most first-year students who have matriculated in the Black school system, however, are at the stage 3 reading level and frequently lapse back into stage 2. (Stage 3 is the normal level for L_1 speakers between the ages of 9 and 14. Stage 5 is the optimum level for an undergraduate literature student.)

These findings are underscored by the experiences of English teachers and Academic Support counsellors in South Africa (see Grewar, 1987). It has been suggested that a tendency not to distinguish between spoken and written language lies at the heart of the problems which so many South African ESL undergraduates experience with written English (see Murray, 1990). Because they are accustomed to using the cognitively undemanding structures of the spoken language almost exclusively, and rely heavily on basic interpersonal communicative skills (see Cummins, 1984), students produce structures in writing that are common in the context-embedded confines of spoken language, but are not explicit in the context-reduced written language. Black South African students are relatively unexposed to cognitively demanding texts at school, and so enter the universities, and the English courses, without having acquired cognitive academic language proficiency, often not even in their mother tongues

(see Murray, 1990: 140-141). Most of our ESL students are able to communicate verbally in informal situations, usually with other second language speakers, and do not initially perceive much difference between this type of informal communication and formal, written communication.

South African academics generally appreciate that they have to make changes to their courses to accommodate the changing student classes. The cultural barriers experienced by second language readers (see Eskey, 1975; Kobayashi, 1975; Rivers, 1981; Povey, 1987; Carrell, 1988a; Brooks, 1989) are an understandable concern of a large many South African undergraduate literature teachers and there is a continuing debate on the appropriate selection of texts for ESL students.

There is general agreement in South Africa that African material (both creative and critical) needs to feature more prominently in the syllabuses of English departments (see Chapman, 1990). Some South African academics have suggested eliminating all Anglophone and indeed all Eurocentric writing. In South Africa, as elsewhere in the third-world, rationalisations for the culturally-based selection of specific texts are frequently coloured by socio-political considerations. A not uncontroversial issue in South African academic circles is the "relevance" of studying literature that does not contain certain ideological messages. One undergraduate literature course designer basis his choice of literary texts to be studied on the need, as he sees it, for students to able to

> ... relate their literary education to issues of oppression and liberation, social conditioning and political emancipation (Chapman, 1990).

A number of academics see the English department as promoting an overtly ideological programme (see Couzens, 1977; Vaughan, 1984; Orkin, 1987).

Not all English undergraduate teachers in South Africa subscribe to such an ideological approach, however. One academic acknowledges that, while students of contemporary African writing need to be acquainted with the political background, since "politics and ideology is the very stuff of modern African literature", a literature course cannot realistically seek to introduce students to the complexities of Africa's political troubles (see Wright, 1990a). He points out that students are more likely

> ... to experience a comforting ideological massage in the stream of socio-economic discourse which supports what has become a dominant *literary* paradigm of African development. As a result, their supposedly "literary" education equips them with an insufficiently tested (and perhaps bogus) command of socio-political and developmental issues (1990a: 43).

Many South African English departments still follow the British literature department model, using Leavisite principles and the methods of Practical Criticism. Language tends to be taught separately if it is taught at all. In

1991, five out the 21 universities in South Africa[6] integrated the study of literature and language in courses on linguistics and discourse analysis within the English departments. Three of these dealt specifically with stylistics[7].

The use of communicative methods in language teaching has influenced ESL language teaching in South Africa. The affect is slowly starting to filter through to a few ESL undergraduate literature courses too. Generally, however, interactive methods and group activities tend to be used in support courses and in language courses rather than to teach English literature in the English departments themselves[8].

A literature course for second language students clearly needs to be constructed according to different principles from those which serve as the foundations for a mother-tongue literature course. The objectives of a second-language literature course should, ideally, take cognisance of the fact that second language students experience varying degrees of linguistic, cultural and formal barriers when reading texts in their target language.

The L_2 learner requires communicative and literary competence to enable him to understand and interpret literary texts fully. An ESL literature course based on the above principles, would aim to train students in the application of

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6. Bloemfontein, Potchefstroom, Port Elizabeth, Rhodes, QwaQwa and Venda.
7. Port Elizabeth, QwaQwa and Venda.
8. See Adey (1987) who uses an interactive process method in a support programme for English literature students at UNISA; and (Lazar, 1990) on the Wits Reading Literature course (an optional bridging course for first-year English), where the focus is literary rather than linguistic

textual strategies by promoting the acquisition of six types of competence, namely grammatical or linguistic, sociolinguistic, strategic, cultural, discourse and literary competence.

Grammatical competence (the ability to recognise and apply the grammatical rules of a language), is required for effective oral and written communication. It also enables students to read and interpret both literary and non-literary texts successfully.

Sociolinguistic competence is required for appropriate linguistic and extra-linguistic behaviour in varying social contexts. It incorporates the use of different registers and situational varieties of language. Sociolinguistic competence also, is required for the comprehension and interpretation of literary and non-literary texts. It involves communicative interaction with other speakers, and also the ability to interact with texts (see Savignon et al., 1983).

Strategic competence (also called "communication strategies" by Canale and Swain, 1980), encompasses paraphrasing, extrapolation, understanding and interpreting metaphors and non-linguistic communication such as gesture (see Savignon, 1983). Strategic competence is essential for successful reading. Once readers are able to apply the strategies of successful readers they are able to interpret literary texts. Strategic competence includes the ability to relate texts to one another. It is necessary for the

compréhension and interpretation of the behaviour and speech of characters in narratives. It enables the reader to understand how fictional and dramatic characterisation are effected.

Discourse competence involves the ability to make inferences from the information provided in spoken or written utterances. It includes grasping and using the network of relationships and suprasentential links between sentences and meaning (coherence techniques), grasping and using intersentential and intrasentential links (cohesive devices), distinguishing between *topic* and *comment*, and recognising discourse patterns.

Cultural competence includes knowledge of the appropriate cultural features used in the target language. In a literature course, the cultural competence of the students needs to be expanded for them to understand texts based on cultures which are different from those of their own.

Associated with discourse competence is *literary competence* which comprises the kind of knowledge a reader needs about language and about literary conventions to enable him

> ... to read and interpret works in ways which (are considered) acceptable, in accordance with the institution of literature (Culler, 1975: 124).

The acquisition of literary competence entails the acquisition of advanced level analytical skills and of certain formal

schemata. These skills enable students to formulate their own responses to literature.

If, as indicated above, the objectives of the literature department are to guide students in acquiring the textual skills necessary for the comprehension and interpretation of all literary texts, then texts should be selected from a wide spectrum of cultures, genres and rhetorical types. Text selection needs to take cognisance of cultural differences but the selector needs to be circumspect in his selection. ESL literature teachers could do worse than take cognisance of Rosenblatt's observations (from a transactional theory perspective), that

> (n)aïve readers - indeed, not-so-naïve readers, may tend most readily to articulate judgments in categories closely linked to their own life concerns. If these predominate to the degree that they block out considerations of form and style and structure, we may censure them as treating the text simply as a moral or political document ... These various categories of value are simply frames of reference for looking at the organic totality of the literary transaction. Obviously, we seek a text that we can rate high in many categories (1978: 157).

An ESL literature course must surely have as one of its most basic objectives the guidance of students from being naïve readers to being competent readers.

A further pointer to the text selector to proceed with caution is that it is not always possible to predict what the cultural barriers to comprehension will be (see Povey, 1987; Brumfit and Carter, 1986a; Marshall, 1979; Brooks, 1989). Rural African students often relate more easily to Shakespeare (for example Macbeth and the witches), and to nineteenth-century literature (which manifests similarities in the rural way of life and thought), than do many urban, English-speaking students. A recent study of the reading habits and preferences of ESL teacher trainees in South Africa (Mawasha et al., 1992), reveals that in this group of African students at least, Dickens and Hardy are as popular as the African writers Achebe and Ngugi, and Shakespearean plays are read for pleasure. One cannot assume, therefore, that one's students are not capable of comprehending and interpreting texts that are not African texts. In fact, to make such an assumption - either explicitly or tacitly, by the structuring of the course to exclude all Eurocentric texts - is to suggest that the ESL student is not intelligent and sophisticated enough to differentiate in a reasoned manner between disparate perspectives on a spectrum of philosophies, cultures, ideologies and beliefs.

There are clearly many levels on which the ESL student can relate to a literary work that is not written by a native speaker of his own mother tongue. Brumfit and Carter point out that the ESL literature teacher needs to

> ... be conscious of the intellectual level, the social and political expectations, the cultural

> presuppositions and the previous literary - aesthetic experience, as well as the linguistic level of each class of students (1986a: 32).

Using that awareness, the ESL literature teacher is able to select appropriate texts.

As we know, linguistic barriers in ESL literary study exist as a result of the lexical and structural complexity of texts. Certain types of gradation are usually necessary in an ESL literature course. Texts need to be selected with due reference not only to the linguistic complexity but also to the cultural, and formal complexity, so that they at all times provide a roughly i+1 input for the students (such as that proposed by Krashen, 1985, for second language acquisition). However, researchers have found that, while a *basic* level of linguistic competence is necessary for comprehension in L_2 reading (Cummins, 1979; Alderson, 1984; Carrell, 1988b), exposure to unsimplified, linguistically complex texts (Shook, 1977; Blau, 1981), in the L_2 can actually **improve** reading ability and comprehension (Nuttall, 1982; Eskey, 1983; Krashen, 1989) - particularly with the concomitant use of interactive, integrative, holistic language instruction based on self-contained, authentic texts (Devine, 1987; Carrell, 1988b). All texts used in the classroom should require students to use a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic information to process the meaning (see Widdowson, 1975; Rodger, 1983; Short and Candlin, 1986; Devine, 1987; Povey, 1987; Sowden, 1988; McKay, 1989a; Prodromou, 1989).

The selection of appropriate texts may be considered the first step towards achieving the objectives of an ESL literature course as outlined above. A multiple approach in the classroom which integrates the study of language and literature goes still further. Students can be guided in the acquisition of the linguistic, formal and cultural schemata they require to process literary texts effectively during reading, in a language-based approach which incorporates literary stylistic analysis and interpretation. Elements of an information-based approach furnish the second-language student with valuable background information about the cultural and formal schemata in the text. A personal response-based component incorporated into the course takes students' responses to the texts into consideration. The acquisition of the different types of competence thus acquired will contribute to the breaking down of the linguistic, cultural and literary barriers to full comprehension and informed interpretation of texts.

A language-based approach is an appropriate adaptation of the communicative method in the ESL literature classroom. A language-based approach tends to be activity-based and student-centred. It aims to guide students in the development of general language competence and of interpretive skills, using teaching strategies and techniques common in communicative language teaching such as prediction, cloze (information gap) procedures, summaries, guided rewriting, jigsaw exercises, pre-reading and re-reading. Activities can be graded according to students' communicative and literary

competence. Linguistic and discourse categories can be graded cyclically and not taught as separate entities.

As Carter (1986) points out, a language-based teaching model informs the literature class and provides for a systematic approach to literary study. A language-based approach integrates language and literature in ESL teaching and manipulates the classroom environment for the benefit of the student. Students work in groups on task-based exercises and activities. The literary texts are themselves the authentic texts essential in the communicative method. Student responses such as verbal responses and activity responses are authentic language activities and are incorporated in the personal response-based component of the course. Student responses are usually the starting point for discussions, followed by exercises to develop the different types of competence.

Background information may provided in the form of pre-reading activities, sometimes using audio-visual material. Short lectures at the beginning of each class, classroom activities, notes and research assignments can also provide cultural and literary background information. The provision of background information makes up part of the information-based component of the course, but it should not an be objective of an ESL literature course to teach English culture or to teach any other Eurocentric culture.

Language-based exercises and activities can be designed specifically to guide students in the acquisition of the

various types of competence in which an ESL literature course should, in my opinion, aim to guide the students. As students acquire such competence, they simultaneously extend their existing schemata and acquire new schemata. Once students understand how literature works, literature and literature study make sense to them. This understanding is brought about when they learn about literary conventions and are able to see how writers use language to produce literary texts which are intelligible and meaningful to the reader.

The ESL methodology literature supports the view that, when a language-based approach is used to teach literature to ESL students, the literature course itself provides the motivation for language acquisition (see Short and Candlin, 1986; Collie and Slater, 1987). Literary texts are useful for the teaching and acquisition of general linguistic competence (also see Moody, 1971; Marquardt, 1975; Moody, 1983; Rodger, 1983; Trengove, 1983; Brumfit, 1986a; Brumfit and Carter, 1986; Hill, 1986; Short and Candlin, 1986; Collie and Slater, 1987; Povey, 1987; Sage, 1987; Carter, 1988; Sowden, 1988; McKay, 1989a and Prodromou, 1989). Reading research suggests that language instruction should proceed from texts in an holistic and integrative manner, with the exclusion of all drills and discrete point exercises which isolate language items. Brumfit and Carter observe that literature

> ... offers a context in which exploration and discussion of *content* ... leads on naturally to examination of language. What is said is bound up

> very closely with how it is said, and students come to understand and appreciate this. Literary texts provide examples of language resources being used to the full and the reader is placed in an *active* interactional role in working with and making sense of this language ... It is a basis for students to work out why they like reading what they read, and for extending their language into the more abstract domains associated with increasingly advanced language competence (1986a: 15).

Literary stylistic analysis of texts is worthwhile for ESL students because it enables them, initially with guidance from the teacher, to

> ... work out for themselves the expressive purposes a writer might embrace in fulfilling or deviating from linguistic expectations (Brumfit and Carter, 1986a: 20).

As Pearce (1977) puts it

> Linguistic analysis becomes an integral aspect of the process of understanding literature, a means of formulating intuition, a means of objectifying it and rendering it susceptible to investigation and, in so doing, a means of feeling out and revising our initial interpretation (cited in Brumfit and Carter, 1986a: 4).

An analysis of form can assist in the interpretation of a literary text, even if it is in itself not an interpretation.

Literary stylistic analysis not only concretises intuitions, it also promotes comprehension of literary texts.

Rosenblatt's comment (1978), based on research in transactional psychology, that "we can learn to see new clues and to impose new patterns of interpretation" has significant implications for the ESL literature teacher. Naïve readers can be guided towards more sophisticated responses. A good reader is able to generalise from a literary text to personal or social elements in the world outside and to overall literary tradition (Brumfit, 1986). A good literature teacher should be able to guide students in developing the potential they have to make those associations.

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